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# Bettymania and the Death of Celebrity Culture

Jeffrey Kahan \*

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**Abstract:** »*Bettymania und der Tod der Prominentenkultur*«. In 2010, I published a book, *Bettymania and the Birth of Celebrity Culture*. In this article, I want to revisit the topic, not because Bettymania matches our present reality but, rather, to measure our present paradigm against its originator. Whatever new era we now occupy, it can no longer be accurately dubbed "celebrity-driven." Given that our airwaves are saturated with reality TV and YouTube navel gazing, that Facebook has now turned everyone into an expert on personal branding and self-promotion, and that, in America, we have a celebrity as our commander-in-chief, this argument may strike many as wrongheaded; but, to a large extent, what we meant by celebrity culture and the rules that we affixed to it, no longer apply. A study of Bettymania may well offer us some understanding of celebrity culture, but the inception of that culture now seems trivial compared to its date of expiration, which, I argue, occurred the moment Donald Trump was elected President of the United States.

**Keywords:** Celebrity Culture, fame, regency theater, reality TV, Donald Trump, Madonna, Bettymania.

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## 1. Introduction

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In 1804, a kind of madness descended upon London. A 13-year-old boy-actor, William Henry West Betty, newly arrived from Ireland, seized the English capital. Londoners forgot their differences and united in their devotion to the child:

the peer abandoned his claret, the shopkeeper his ale, the man-milliner forgot his frills, and the ladies almost forgot their toilette – in a word all classes of society felt the impulse, and vied only with each other in the most obvious and effectual demonstrations of their admiration.(Carr 1818, 230)<sup>1</sup>

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Even an iconoclast like the poet Byron recorded that he saw Betty on several occasions, each time “at the hazard of my life” (Byron 1806).<sup>2</sup>

Although it is possible that Byron was exaggerating, there were, undoubtedly, risks involved in seeing Betty. Across the United Kingdom, mobs tore at each other to get tickets; in Liverpool, one woman was trampled to death in the scrum outside the theatre, prompting one memorialist to hope that London women would “avoid so disastrous a fate” (Playfair 1967, 63). Crowds were so intent upon securing seats for Betty’s London premiere at Covent Garden on Saturday, December 1, 1804, that the theatre, fearing riots and injury, placed a “strong detachment of guards” outside the theatre and a “select body of peace officers” within (Dodsley 1804, 437).<sup>3</sup> They proved ineffective. When the doors were finally opened, “there was a rush which,” if we can believe the most sanguinary of accounts, “ultimately cost some persons their lives” (Doran 1865, 298). Private boxes were soon overrun with patrons. When the boxholders tried to get them ejected, the mob simply turned hostile. Crowds broke windows and doors were ripped from their moorings. The “pressure was so great, that in the course of the night several men were overcome with the heat, and lifted up into the boxes, whence they were carried out of the House” (Anon 1804 *Critique*, 13).

Riots and mayhem marred Betty’s second performance at Drury Lane (December 13, 1804), whereupon fans, unable to secure tickets,

broke most of the windows within their reach on the Vinegar-yard side of the Theatre; and by the impetuosity of their movement when the passages were thrown open, the balustrades on both sides of the staircase which leads to the boxes, were entirely demolished. (Jackson 1804a)<sup>4</sup>

Within the theatre, two gents, arguing over a box seat, pulled out pistols and threatened to shoot each other (Houghton Library [n.d.]).<sup>5</sup> Repeated performances only seemed to stoke interest. The *Monthly Mirror* reported that even a month after the boy’s London premiere, “crowds still continue to press the theatre on every night of his performance” (Carr 1805, 133).<sup>6</sup> On February 11, 1805, two and a half months after Londoners’ first rioted for Betty tickets, the *Morning Chronicle* reported that the “curiosity of the public seems to increase instead of abating”; on March 4, 1805, the *Morning Chronicle* stated that Bet-

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<sup>1</sup> *The Theatrical Inquisitor, and Monthly Mirror* (April 1818), 230.

<sup>2</sup> Byron to Augusta Leigh, April 25, 1805, Technically, Byron was already a poet, though not yet an icon. His first book of verse, *Fugitive Pieces*, was printed in the autumn of 1806, but the collection contained poems written as early as 1802.

<sup>3</sup> *Annual Register*, 46 (1806 for 1804): 437.

<sup>4</sup> *Ipswich Journal*, December 22, 1804.

<sup>5</sup> Press clipping in *Playbills-Stars – Male – Betty, W. H.*, Houghton Library, Harvard; Memoir of W. H. W. Betty, *English Roscius*, 12; Press clipping in *Playbills-Stars – Male – Betty, W. H.*, Houghton Library, Harvard.

<sup>6</sup> *Monthly Mirror* XIX (1805), 133.

ty's acting was "more admired by the public the oftener it is seen"; on June 5, 1805, the *Aberdeen Journal* announced to its readers that, even after six months and just over 60 performances of Betty at Drury Lane or Covent Garden, his "attraction [in London] is unabated," his final performance of *Hamlet* for the season was "nearly as crowded as on the occasion of his *entree*" (Chalmers 1805).<sup>7</sup>

Like the groupies who would a century and a half later mob Elvis or the Beatles, fans raved and regularly fainted when near "the divine Master Betty" (Baker 1878, 246). The *Caledonian Mercury* reported that on Betty's first London appearance, the "screams of the females were very distressing, and several fainted away"; the *Morning Chronicle* reported that during a performance of Betty's Romeo, "nearly thirty persons were pulled from the pit, in fainting fits" (Robertson 1804a; Perry 1805a).<sup>8</sup> One emboldened woman stood up in the theatre and promptly stripped down to her underwear (Robertson 1804b).<sup>9</sup> Even older, sophisticated men were strangely overcome by emotion. When watching the boy perform, Drury Lane's manager R. B. Sheridan shed sighs, tears, and sobs; a similarly affected William Pitt, the Prime Minister of England, wept openly and uncontrollably (Lady Bessborough in Gower 1917, I:495).

Fans followed him wherever he went and even camped outside his house. Richard Cumberland, a distinguished playwright of the period, recalled that he was walking around London one day when he found himself outside of Betty's residence. A large crowd had gathered to catch a glimpse of the phenomenon. Cumberland observed that one man brought his trained bear and started an *impromptu* performance for ready change, but when Betty appeared at the window, the throng abandoned "the bear and the bear-leader in a solitude" (Cumberland 1969, 314). Betty's renown was such that one London restaurateur changed the name of his establishment to "Betty's Cook-shop," and, inspired by the boy's portrayal of Achmet, served a dish called "*Ach-meat*." The owner expected as a result "a very considerable increase of customers" from "all the country" (Walter 1804a).<sup>10</sup> When the *Morning Chronicle* reported that Betty was going that evening to the Haymarket Theatre to see Mary Goldsmith's comedy *She Lives, or The Generous Brother*, the theatre expected an "early overflow to take place, in consequence of our dramatic prodigy attending." (Perry 1804a)<sup>11</sup> There was more than curiosity at work here. Fans felt a real connection to this young star. When Betty was struck with a bout of diar-

<sup>7</sup> The *Aberdeen Journal*, June 5, 1805.

<sup>8</sup> The *Caledonian Mercury*, December 6, 1804; *Morning Chronicle*, February 8, 1805.

<sup>9</sup> The *Caledonian Mercury*, December 8, 1804.

<sup>10</sup> *Times*, December 4, 1804.

<sup>11</sup> *Morning Chronicle*, December 17, 1804.

rhoea, his devotees demanded and received daily bulletins on his recovery (Burton 1805, 10).<sup>12</sup>

Even Royalty, whose very majesty depended upon theatrical displays of pomp and circumstance, was caught up in Bettymania. The king, queen, and princesses personally visited Drury Lane to have a private audience with Betty, wherein he was “much noticed and caressed” (Jackson 1804b).<sup>13</sup> The equally attentive Duke of Clarence and Lady Beaumont visited Betty to dine at their house in Stable Yard and later accompanied the boy to the Tower of London, where “he was received with the honours usually reserved for royal personages.” (Perry 1804b)<sup>14</sup> Not to be outdone, the Prince of Wales invited Betty to the royal residence, Carleton House, whereupon arrival the prince “complimented him in the most flattering terms on his theatrical abilities,” and soon after presented the prodigy with a royal carriage and four (Robertson 1804b).<sup>15</sup> Betty was “ushered into the drawing-room of London, with all the pomp of a foreign Ambassador” (Perry 1805b).<sup>16</sup> The Count d’Artois, the future King of France, hurried over to Lady Percival’s party to see the plump-faced boy shake his abundant blond curls and recite poetry in French (Betty and Betty 1846, 12. Doran 1865, II: 298). The Prime Minister adjourned debate in the House of Commons early so that he and his fellow cabinet ministers could gaze upon the teen wonder’s portrayal of Hamlet.

Acclaimed poets and artists genuflected in similar hope and wonder. William Wordsworth prayed that Betty would “rescue the English theatre from the infamy that has fallen upon it” (Selincourt and Shaver 1967).<sup>17</sup> The famed painters John Opie and James Northcote rendered the boy’s cherubic likeness in classical attitudes and remained grovelingly “sensible of the favour” (Houghton Library [n.d.]);<sup>18</sup> miniatures and medallions of Betty were worn proudly throughout London. His bust was struck up in marble by sculptors; verses were poured upon him in the sickly-sweet style of idolatrous adulation; even his pet dog, a bulldog – British nationalists rejoiced! – was subject of a commercial etching.<sup>19</sup>

The boy profited mightily. He was paid £50, then £100 a night, and once as much as £1,200 for a single performance (Dunlap 1913, 332). This in an era

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<sup>12</sup> Author attribution made by the New York Public Library online catalogue.

<sup>13</sup> *The Ipswich Journal*, December 8, 1804.

<sup>14</sup> *Morning Chronicle*, December 15, 1804.

<sup>15</sup> *Caledonian Mercury*, December 8, 1804.

<sup>16</sup> *Morning Chronicle*, November 27, 1805.

<sup>17</sup> William Wordsworth to Sir George Beaumont, December 25, 1804, in Wordsworth & Wordsworth 1907, 174.

<sup>18</sup> T. L. Parker, unpublished letter to Betty Sr., dated November 13, 1804, found in Houghton Library, Harvard, bMS THR 467.

<sup>19</sup> A print of Betty’s dog Pug can be found in T-Iconography, William-Henry Betty, at Lincoln Center, NYPL.

when John Philip Kemble was paid £12 a night, supporting actors at Drury Lane made do on less than £3 a performance, and Edmund Kean, then a star in the provinces, somehow survived on 6 shillings a week! (To adjust these numbers for our currency valuation, multiply the sum by 77: Kemble was making £924 a night; the average London performer made £231 a night; poor Edmund Kean made £3.85 a night; Master Betty earned anywhere from £3,670 to £92,400 a performance.<sup>20</sup>) By July 30, 1808, the *Ipswich Journal* reported that Betty, in a mere four years, had earned more than David Garrick had in a lifetime.

“Popular” does not begin to capture the fever Betty inspired. Embraced by royalty, caressed by dukes and duchesses, feted by poets, flattered by wits, panegyricized by painters and sculptors, wafted to morning rehearsals in coroneted carriages, attended by powdered lackeys, stuck up in printshop windows, coined into medallions, sliced into luncheon meats, assailed by admiring crowds, the collective phenomenon was so unfamiliar, unusual, and irrational that British society had to create a new word for it – Bettymania. We, however, have a modern word for it – celebrity.

In 2010, I published a book on Bettymania arguing that he was the first truly modern celebrity. Ten years on, I think it vital to revisit Bettymania, not because it continues to match our obsession with actors, musicians, teen idols, and the like, but, rather, to measure our present paradigm against its originator. Whatever new era we now occupy, it can no longer be accurately dubbed “celebrity-driven.” Given that, in America we have a celebrity as our commander-in-chief, this argument may strike many as wrongheaded; but, to a large extent, what we meant by celebrity culture and the rules that we affixed to it, no longer apply.

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## 2. Celebrity Culture is Not the Same as Fame

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Most scholars agree that the concept of celebrity was in place by the end of the 18th century, though celebrities themselves were not necessarily household names. The modern sense of the word celebrity – OED 4, “a person of celebrity; a celebrated person; a public character” – was first used in 1849, well after Bettymania. The OED can be notoriously inaccurate in terms of dates; still, the gloss offers us a sense of the word’s novelty in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Ghislaine McDayter has investigated the era’s struggle to create a “critical vocabulary for the new-fangled and gimmicky “cultural phenomenon, celebrity” (ibid., 45). Andrew Elfenbein similarly asserts that celebrity was increasingly, if some-

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<sup>20</sup> The monetary adjustment is based on the Inflation Calculator found on the website for the Bank of England.

times distastefully and dismissively, linked to a degraded sense of fame, or what “fame meant in a capitalist literary system” (Elfenbein 1995, 47).

It is clear, however, that celebrity was a minor achievement, a distinct second-place to another model of public acknowledgment – fame. Explaining the differences between the two forms of tribute, Hester Lynch Piozzi wrote that fame conveys “names of more importance to future ages, and regions far remote,” whereas the newer concept celebrity “is of a weaker degree in strength, and narrower in extent”; it “commands – and justly – the admiration of his own small circle” (Piozzi 1794, 134). Fame, though long-lasting, was difficult to come by – a stellar military victory, an outstanding scientific breakthrough, the writing, painting, or sculpting of a masterpiece; celebrity, on the other hand, might be cheaply earned by, or even freely bestowed on, people from all walks of life. In the summer of 1703, the blond-haired, blue-eyed Latinist George Psalmanazar, claiming to be a cannibal prince from Formosa (present-day Taiwan), enjoyed much of the renown we now associate with celebrity, actor David Garrick’s various self-promotions in the 1760s were early and important instances of celebrity-making; the teenage poet and forger Thomas Chatterton died a virtual unknown in 1770, but, by the 1790s, was referred to as a “celebrity” (Anonymous 1796, 614).<sup>21</sup> For example, an anonymous letter in *The Monthly Magazine* refers to Alexander Catcott, vicar of the Temple Church, Bristol, as basking in Chatterton’s “celebrity which he [Catcott] would otherwise have sought in vain” (Russet and Dane 2002, 141).<sup>22</sup> In the 1780s, the actress, writer, and Royal concubine Mary Robinson was aware of, if not always thrilled with, her public persona. Her dresses were copied, her poetry recited, her face immortalized by Joshua Reynolds (Byrne 2004, 165, 119). In the words of Claire Brock “far from shrinking from the glare of publicity, Mary Robinson embraced the exposure” (Brock 2006, 83).

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### 3. Mania Marketing

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But early celebrity culture – all too often lacked substance, weight, even fans and followers. Note that Piozzi relegated the social impact of celebrity to a “small circle.” So far as the aforementioned examples of 18th-century celebrity are concerned, she was doubtless correct. Curiosity concerning Psalmanazar was localized to London, and even then among only a small number of academics; the wider population of London – to say nothing of Britain as a whole

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<sup>21</sup> Anonymous letter in *The Monthly Magazine*, referring to Alexander Catcott, vicar of the Temple Church, Bristol, “on whom Chatterton has reflected a celebrity which he would otherwise have sought in vain” (Vol. 2. Jul-Dec. 1796, 614).

<sup>22</sup> Margaret Russet and Joseph A. Dane (2002) refer to Chatterton as “an avatar of modern celebrity” but also suggest the debate as to who is the first celebrity is “overblown” (141).

– probably “didn’t care whether Psalmanazer was a Formosan or not” (Keevak 2004, 36).<sup>23</sup> Garrick was well known in different parts of England, Scotland, and Ireland, though, as Tom Mole asserts, elements of his “celebrity apparatus were not yet working in concert” (Mole 2007, 9). Awareness of Chatterton grew after his death, but his celebrity remained confined chiefly to a narrow, Romantic sphere. Mary Robinson’s celebrity was still narrower. Her book of poems sold scarcely 600 copies, and those only by private subscription. Overall, early celebrity promotion seems trivial and amateurish, at least in comparison to Betty’s business-like media machine, which sought public endorsements, paid critics for positive notices, issued daily health bulletins, leaked private correspondence for press release, repackaged the boy-actor for regional markets, and profited directly and indirectly from Betty merchandising. Ranging between 1 1/2 to 3 1/2 inches in length and designed as intimate keepsakes, Betty miniatures, bronze medallions, snuff boxes, and household coffee cups nicely objectified the boy’s petite and delicate figure. Further, the quality, motif, color and sheer variety of these mementos allowed each buyer to pick and choose the object that fit a standard of living or a routine of daily existence. By way of bronze, brush, ivory, and fine china, young Betty could be adorned, adored, caressed, kissed, and demitassed – in sum, emotionally familiarized.

There is something entirely modern about this aspect of Bettymania. All that seems to be missing are the t-shirts and road-side billboards. Moreover, this marketing of Betty does not easily fit our traditional notions of Romantic consumerism. Judith Pascoe has recently argued that Romantic collectors reflected their culture’s new awareness of the past as an idealized lost world, “partly salvageable through the recovery and preservation of old objects and documents” (Pascoe 2005, 4). However, her premise, while workable for collectibles (i.e., first folios of Shakespeare), does not address the marketing of new items or the celebrity tie-ins so common during Bettymania. McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb (1982) assert that new promotional techniques were central to the development of late 18th- and early 19th-century consumerism (142), but, curiously, do not link them to Bettymania or celebrity culture. Frances Bonner dates the “full” development of modern celebrity to around 1910-1920 – “full” is defined as the ability of the celebrity to work as a pitchman for “new consumer ideals” (Bonner 2005, 65).

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<sup>23</sup> Keevak refers to Psalmanazer as a “celebrity” on pages 6, 28, and 36.



Image 1: Detail of a Betty Collectable Next to Inch Ruler



Personal Collection. For more images of Bettymania collectables, see my book, *Bettymania and the Birth of Celebrity Culture* (2010).

To understand how these trinkets aided in the creation and expression of affection, we may turn to *The Journal of Eliza* (1767) in which Laurence Sterne holds and talks to a miniature painting of his beloved Eliza Draper:

I verily think my Eliza I shall get this Picture set, so as to wear it, as I purpose  
– ab<sup>t</sup> my neck – [...] it shall be nearer my heart – Thou art ever in its centre.  
(Sterne 1904, 141)

We may demur that Sterne knew his Eliza and, therefore, was quite naturally attached to the token because he felt that it was a suitable, personalized substitute for his beloved; further, it is all too obvious that Betty never knew. The vast majority of his fans, who were willing, in extreme instances, to risk life and limb to see him. Yet his fans, with their personally-imbued Betty images and trinkets, persisted in the *illusion of a relationship*, sure that they knew him, and equally sure that he, accustomed to their devotion, knew them.

Here too, the link to modern celebrity culture is apparent. Jessica Evans notes that “typical” celebrity images, particularly close-ups, allow the viewer the feeling of “peering into his [the celebrity’s] soul” (Evans 2005, 13). Likewise, Joseph Roach has recently focused on photographs of celebrity actors, musicians, teen throbs, and the like that

circulate widely in the absence of their persons [...] but the very tension between their widespread visibility and their actual remoteness creates an unfilled need in the heart of the public. One aspect of this need manifests itself as a craving to communicate with the privately embodied source of the aura.  
(Roach 2005, 16)

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#### 4. Alt. Facts: The Art of Puffing

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Bettymania relied upon more than the marketing of chachkes and knickknacks: print media, both in pamphlets and newspapers, played a role as well, though, due to the haste of meeting market demand, “facts” were either dispensed with, altered, or simply invented. John Merritt, who wrote perhaps the most popular of Betty biographies, labeled the various narratives of his rivals as “altogether fabulous, and all of them very erroneous” (1804, 11). For example, the anonymous author of *The Wonderful Theatrical Progress of W. Hen. West Betty, the Infant Roscius* (1804) states that his pamphlet would at last correct, by way of “authenticated documents,” the various fictional memoirs foisted upon the public. The author begins by pointing out that the boy was born in England, not, as some biographers had affirmed, in Ireland. Within one page, however, this same author adds to the confusion by stating that Mrs. Betty and her sisters enjoyed theatricals and, therefore, encouraged her son’s actorly interests (3-4). Extant documents suggest that Mrs. Betty had no sisters and hated the very thought of her son treading the boards. Believe it or not, there is even some debate concerning something as basic as the date of Betty’s first performance.

The anonymous author of Betty’s official memoir, *Memoirs of Mr. W.H.W. Betty, The English Roscius*, offers two dates: the narrative states that Betty first performed on the Belfast stage on August 16, 1803 but then cites the text of the original playbill which bears the date August 19 (Betty and Betty 1846, 2). Other unofficial biographers muddle the facts still more: George Davies Harley (1804) and the anonymous authors of *Roscius in London* and *Authentic Sketch* agree that Betty was first “announced” – that is, advertised – to play Osman on August 16, 1803, but do not provide a date of the actual performance; John Doran cites Betty’s opening as taking place on August 11, 1803; in another work he modifies to an announcement of August 16, 1803, with no date of performance; Henry Barton Baker also opts for an announcement of August 16, with no date for an actual performance; Alexander Stephens states that Betty made his debut of August 1, 1803, while John Merritt plays it safe by stating that Betty first performed sometimes in the “middle of August” (Harley 1804, 14; Betty 1805, 6; Doran 1865, II:296; Doran 1881, I:26; Baker 1879, II:185; Stephens 1806, 27; see also Anon, *An Authentic Sketch*, 1804, 9). And so it goes. Some biographers report that Betty started acting when he was five years old (Farington 1923, II:288); others report that he became interested in theatre in 1802, when he was eleven years old (Anon, *Memoirs and Interesting Anecdotes* 1804, 5; Harley 1804, 11). In one version, Betty, after a lucrative run in Liverpool, is solicited by that playhouse to perform an additional 14 nights for £1,500; in a later version, the proposal is made not by the Liverpool theatre but by the Sheffield theatre; in all but one version, Betty’s management declines

the offer, but in *Memoirs and Interesting Anecdotes*, it is accepted, though the offer is now for ten, not fourteen, performances.

In one biography, we learn that Betty works with an acting coach assiduously; in another we read that the boy has no acting coach at all; in one version, we are informed that Betty's memory is so prodigious that he learns the entire part of Hamlet in three days; another version, the feat takes just three mornings; in another account, Betty memorizes his 1,569 lines, his 358 catch lines, his stage blocking, and his entrances and exits in just three *hours* (Doran 1865 II, 300; Harley 1804, 60; The Dictionary of National Biography Vol. 4, 442).<sup>24</sup>

Aggrandizement and, relatedly, inaccuracy are perhaps to be expected by writers and reporters out to make a quick buck; nor should we expect otherwise, in our (or in any other) market driven era. If we are to believe newspaper man Leigh Hunt, "puffing" – that is, paid advertisements masquerading as real reportage, or what we would call "infomercials" – were common in 19th century theatrical marketing campaigns, as were free tickets and lobster dinners.

Puffing and plenty of tickets were, however, the system of the day. It was an interchange of amenities over the dinner-table; a flattery of power on the one side, and puns on the other; and what the public took for a criticism on a play, was a draft upon the box-office, or reminiscences of last Thursday's salmon and lobster-sauce. (Hunt 1966, 402)

In the case of Master Betty, however, both embellishment and error were so acute as to warrant comment and complaint. In a letter dated December 28, 1804, a resident of London, Mrs. Copley, wrote to her daughter:

When you read our papers you may imagine that attention to the young Roscius is the most important pursuit of the present time. It is the general impression that 'Master Betty' is a prodigy in his theatrical art, but that too much fuss is made about him; but neither the motives or powers for puffing have ceased. (Amory 1969, 266)

Even pens-for-hire such as John Wilson Croker condemned the counterfeit reportage: "God forbid that I should expect from newspapers, nothing but sense and honest truth – I am not so unreasonable" (Croker 1804, xii). In the case of Bettymania, there was also some deliberate *anti*-puffing. Robert Burton, for example, stated that reports of full houses and universal applause were overdone: "in reality the audience was thin, and the approbation very little" (Democritus and Burton 1805, 20). However, Burton was a Betty-detractor, and his version of events does not agree with the many reports of riots and full houses. Aside from the (alleged) newspaper hype, the theatres themselves had tricks to ensure full houses and raucous applause for the Young Roscius. Ringers were "distributed (*judiciously*) in various parts of the House, to give Confirmation to those Descriptions of his Talents, by loud re-iterated Plaudits"

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<sup>24</sup> On a lack of acting coach, see *Memoirs of Mr. W. H. W. Betty*, 2.

(Walter 1805b; Russel 1804, 27).<sup>25</sup> Confirming the extraordinary lengths to which Drury Lane and Covent Garden went to ensure Betty's success, the *Times*, February 4, 1805, reported that "the house was more crowded than it has been, *at least more persons paid for admittance* than on any of the preceding performances" (Walter 1805b).<sup>26</sup>

Considering the circumstances, it is not surprising that some former-Betty fans felt that they had been duped. Their one solace was that it sometimes seemed that everyone had been taken in. Wrote John Campbell, the former Lord High Chancellor of Great Britain:

It was during my critical reign that there appeared that phenomenon Master Betty, 'the infant Roscius.' I must confess that I was one of those who enthusiastically admired him, [...] but if I erred I need not be ashamed, for night after night, as often as he acted, there was Charles James Fox in the stage box, hanging on the boy's lips and rapturously applauding him. (Campbell 1881, 111)

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## 5. National Obsession as Political Distraction

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While artificially created and sustained, interest in Betty, whether positive or negative, remains a surprise, in that boy actors were not in fact a novelty to theatrical audiences. In the Renaissance, child actors, as Shakespeare famously recorded in *Hamlet*, were all the rage and actually threatened to put the traditional adult companies out of business. One boy actor, Salathiel Pavy, was immortalized by Ben Jonson as "the stage's jewel" (Quiller-Couch 1919).<sup>27</sup> Child actors were common in the 18th century, as well. Most played small, inferior parts and had limited skills. The actress Mrs. Jordan spelled out the defects of child actors, whom she had regularly encountered in the theatre:

they either *hoot* out their words, or *mouthe* them – they do not clear off their syllables; they *hang*, and *drawl*. [...] they do not choose to *think* while they speak. (Boaden 1831b, 174)

There were notably gifted exceptions, one or two for every generation of playgoers. David Garrick had been involved in family theatricals as a child and, through selling wine to coffee houses in Covent Garden, had become acquainted with theatre managers and actors. In their respective youths, Sarah Siddons and her brother John Philip Kemble performed minor parts professionally upon the stage. In 1799, another boy actor, Edmund Kean, was making a name for himself as a solo performer. After the boy's private royal performance, an

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<sup>25</sup> *Times*, February 4, 1805; Russel 1804, 27.

<sup>26</sup> *Times*, February 4, 1805; emphasis added.

<sup>27</sup> See Jonson's poem "On Salathiel Pavy," sometimes entitled "Epitaph on S.P., a Child of Queen Elizabeth's Chapel," Epigrams, CXX.

astonished King George III declared him “a lad of great promise” (MacQueen-Pope 1960, 15).

Though child actors were not atypical, it was extraordinary for a boy actor to be the lead in an adult company. Even with the addition of the title “Young Roscius,” the above-cited particulars are not ample enough to justify Bettymania. Clearly, there were other factors that catapulted Betty to celebrity. To begin with, Bettymania might never have taken place were it not for a Romantic preoccupation with childhood. As Judith Plotz notes in her recent study *Romanticism and the Vocation of Childhood* (2001), childhood was in this era “a non-threatening means of commitment to social hope without the need of a political and social transformation” (Plotz 2001, 39). In a Britain threatened externally with Napoleonic invasion and tottered internally with Irish rebellion, to say nothing of governmental policies and market forces that eroded local allegiances and communal structures, the collaborative activity of endorsing a child actor offered much-needed unity to a beleaguered and fragmented society. As R.J. Morris points out, the British “middle class” of this era found its collective identity not through any allegiance to the government or Crown but in a network of voluntary associations (Morris 1990, 167).

Bettymania may here serve as an exemplar. In the words of *the Hull Packet*: “business seems forgot, war and Bonaparte not remembered – the Young Roscius engrossed and filled the attention of ALL” (*Hull Packet* 1804).<sup>28</sup> A similar sentiment was expressed by Betty-biographer John Merritt: Master Betty “rouse[d] the attention of a whole country” and “made a considerable addition to the national stock of intellectual amusement” (Merritt 1804, 10) – note that Merritt sees Ireland, Scotland, and England – the three legs of Betty’s United Kingdom tour, as one “whole country” sharing in one “national” obsession.

Betty’s seemingly boundless celebrity was registered, too, in small, regional newspapers. As we might expect, local papers covered Betty when he came to their town’s playhouse. More surprisingly, papers such as the *Caledonian Mercury*, the *Aberdeen Journal*, the *Belfast News-Letter*, the *Liverpool Mercury*, the *Preston Chronicle*, the *Newcastle Courant*, the *Manchester Times and Gazette*, the *Hampshire Telegraph & Sussex Chronicle*, and the aforementioned *Hull Packet* continued to report on the Betty phenomenon as it made its way across the United Kingdom. It was not just that smaller papers reported on happenings in the major metropolitan centers; a Betty performance staged in faraway Cork or tiny Preston was now worth reporting in major centers like Belfast, Manchester, and London.

As the above-cited newspaper coverage makes clear, Bettymania was a British phenomenon, but it was also carefully tailored to the unique cultures of Ireland, Scotland, and England. While critics have hitherto referred to Betty-

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<sup>28</sup> *Hull Packet*, December 11, 1804.

mania as if it were mammoth and monolithic, Betty's multi-national celebrity and elfin physicality reflected both the realities of the Union and a desire to keep things small-scale, local, traditional, pint-sized. In an era of increasing centralization, we can understand that people in Cornwall or Nottingham, Glasgow or Belfast, or some hamlet in Wales might cling, for example, to a local dialect or to a provincial accent. Bettymania conveniently allowed local cultures to participate in a nationalizing totem without losing their respective traditions and identities. Indeed, what local audiences loved about Betty differed from country to country and even city to city.

Raised in Ireland, the prodigy performed to English loyalists in Belfast without a trace of an Irish accent; in Edinburgh, however, Betty stressed his solidarity with Scottish nationalism by donning the traditional and only recently decriminalized vestments of the tartan kilt, ghillie brogues, and sporran – all appropriate for his portrayal of the Scottish hero Douglas. Betty's physical rendering of Scottish ethnicity was so powerful that the play's ultra-nationalist author, John Home, proclaimed him the "genuine offspring and the son of Douglas" (Anon, *Authentic Sketch* 1804, 11). One ticket buyer recalled that "the pride of noble [Scottish] birth breathed in every word" of Master Betty. (Anon, *Wonderful* 1804, 48). As Betty and his entourage approached the English capital, Bettymania was yet again carefully reconfigured. Bookstalls were crammed with John Merritt's recent *Memoirs of the Life of Wm. Henry West Betty*, in which the boy's journey from Belfast to Edinburgh and thence to London was described as a Napoleonic conquest of sorts. The victorious hero "had already passed through two parts of the empire with an uninterrupted career of success, and the third now only remained for his scene of action" (Merritt 1804, 46).

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## 6. The Trolls Come Out to Play....

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Bettymania depended upon a sophisticated understanding of marketing. However, not all manifestations of Bettymania emanated from Betty or his managers. Audiences were free to create their own Betty-inspired opinions and associations. Some saw Betty as the Wordsworthian archetype of innocence and youthful vigor. Others debated whether the boy's genius was intrinsic and, therefore, inalienable, or acquired and, therefore, perishable. The actress Mrs. Jordan, always a Betty detractor, considered the "Young Roscius" to be no more than a docile child who had been trained to stand or to recite just so. In Jordan's view, Betty was merely parroting the words "he had been taught to pronounce" (Boaden 1831a, 173).

There are always one or two grumblers in every theatrical cast and more than a few in every packed and seemingly appreciative audience, but extant pamphlets and letters indicate that Bettymania included not just rabid support-

ers but also a mob of detractors, who, in print and caricature, attempted to end Bettymania with poisoned prejudice. Thomas Harral, a Betty supporter, complained that

there are beings in this metropolis, who, with a cowardly and assassin-like spirit, darkly attempt to murder his [Betty's] growing fame. Under the mask of criticism, a *notorious* Evening Paper has just commenced a series of attacks against this unoffending boy, which, were it not for their palpable folly, and absurdity, are calculated to render the deepest injury. (Harral 1804, 49-50)

In short, Betty had enemies, the most famous of whom was Leigh Hunt. Beginning in the spring of 1805, Hunt “waged a relentless war against infant prodigies in general and Betty in particular” (Hunt 1966).<sup>29</sup> Attempting to shame any who approved of Betty, Hunt asked his readers to imagine that some foreigner had entered a British theatre for the first time. He would expect an entertainment reflective of a rational and polished people. To his surprise, a “child steps forward, and an uproar of applause burst from the audience”; the tourist in question assumes that the part calls for a child, but the boy-actor is soon addressed *as if he were a man*. Our befuddled foreigner then

turns in some confusion to a neighbour for explanation, and discovers that the child is no other than a mighty warrior, a man of gigantic stature, and the terror of tyrants.

Taking out his notebook, the visitor writes the following:

MEMORANDUM.

The English are fond of plays, but they have no actors. The first characters in their established dramas are represented by children, who in the dearth of more suitable performers, are most intemperately applauded.<sup>30</sup>

Hunt's argument might not have mattered if Britain had been at peace, but in an era of on-again-off-again war with France, its standing in the world as a military and cultural power was under siege. Betty, Hunt argued, was a national embarrassment.

*The Times* also relentlessly attacked the boy, prompting one reader, upset by such “ungenerous,” “cold-blooded,” and “malevolent” attacks, to write to the editor:

The sentiments which mark the conduct of your paper, warrant me in the persuasion that you will not refuse the insertion of some few observations, which the criticism in questions demands.

In his view, such “contemning and reprobating” and “cruel” reviews were designed “to dampen the efforts of early genius, and to discourage and chill its

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<sup>29</sup> Leigh Hunt, *The News*, May 19, 1805.

<sup>30</sup> Leigh Hunt, *The News*, December 29, 1805 (date penciled), found in Press Clippings, Lincoln Center, NYPL, MWEZ.N.C.11745.

future exertions.”<sup>31</sup> Venomous reviews no doubt played a role in the eventual downfall of Bettymania, but, in the short-term, they also aided in publicizing the boy.

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## 7. Eyeballs and Pretty Dolls

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As Leo Braudy notes, both Napoleon and Byron

lived in a world in which the audience was beginning to expect some participation in creating the greatness of their idols as a mirror of their own. Once the message of fame was sent out by their very visible careers, it could return in an incredibly expanded form. (Braudy 1986, 407)

Likewise, Bettymania continued to mushroom in unexpected and not always welcomed ways. Betty’s sexuality became a subject of curiosity. It began innocently enough. Early descriptions of Betty suggest that his audiences saw him as a pretty doll. When he played Romeo, for example, the *Times* dwelled not on his vocals or his acting but upon his costume: panty hose, a tight-fitting jacket, a hat topped with a lofty plume of feathers.<sup>32</sup> Later descriptions of Betty suggest an interest in his psychological and physiological makeup. A minor actress, Miss Davis, described Betty’s features as “delicate” and “feminine”; his long hair was “confined with a comb, which still more gave the idea of a female in male costume” (Griffith 1880, 333).<sup>33</sup> Sarah Siddons and others described Betty in hermaphroditic terms: “the baby [boy] with a woman’s name” (French 1936, 218); Mrs. Mathews echoed the opinion, tagging him the “Betty-Boy” (Mathews 1857, II: 256).<sup>34</sup> Robert Burton opined that Betty’s Romeo was ludicrous because the boy’s “voice was almost in unison with that of the actress” playing Juliet, so much so that, were an auditor to “shut his eyes, it might seem that the responses were made by the same person” (Burton 1805, 13). Betty’s look, voice, and behavior were so feminine that the critic W.P. Russel suggested in all seriousness that a team of physicians be assembled to determine whether Betty was in fact anatomically male. On a more satirical note, the *Times* dismissed Bettymania as little more than a peepshow for perverts:

Master Betty’s success is very naturally the cause of much envy and heart-breaking among the Master Polly’s and Master Jenny’s of Bond Street and

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<sup>31</sup> “To the Editor of *The Times*,” *The Times*, Friday, December 14, 1804, Press Clippings, Theatre Museum, Covent Garden.

<sup>32</sup> “Covent-Garden Theatre,” *The Times*, February 8, 1805.

<sup>33</sup> See also “Young Roscius, Theatre, Kelso, Berwick Company of Comedians,” Clippings, Theatre Museum, Covent Garden; a similar narrative is in *The Era*, February 27, 1853.

<sup>34</sup> See also “Old Playbills and Prints: Drury Lane and Covent Garden,” *The Times*, December 13, 1951.



Cheapside, who in all their attempts to distinguish their pretty persons and effeminate airs, have only MIS-carried.<sup>35</sup>

Satire is always rooted in fact. In the case of Bettymania, men and women who would cringe at being called aberrant, anomalous, atypical, or just plain kinky, were unashamedly interested and oddly aroused by Master Betty. G. M. Woodward suggested that Betty's shapely legs were erotic enough to make "Dancing Masters blush" (Woodward 1805, 13). The theatre manager John Jackson lingered over the child's "attractive" and "petit" body; the *Ipswich Journal* was transfixed by the boy's "pleasing" mouth (Jackson 1804, 20).<sup>36</sup> Alexander Stephens fixated on Betty's hair, which he described as "not only luxuriant, but of a most beautiful hue." The same writer further suggested that Betty flirtatiously encouraged his attention: "He [Betty] is not unconscious of this [the effect his hair has on the writer], and takes care to display his ringlets, on critical occasions with effect" by tossing, stroking, or coyly toying with them (Stephens 1806, 503).<sup>37</sup>

Considering that most consumers knew the boy through idealized media presentment, it is not entirely surprising that Betty was subject to infatuation mistaking itself as enticement. More alarmingly, that infatuation sometimes manifested itself in near-pagan worship. One artist, Ozias Humphrey, described Betty as an Apollo come to life, a deity Germaine Greer describes as the "physical perfection" or "idealized representation of the young male" (Hazlitt 1930, XI, 196; Greer 2003, 38; see also Murray 2002, 373).<sup>38</sup> However considering Betty's age and diminutive size, Humphrey may have confused the muscular Apollo with his boy lover, the curly-haired Hyacinthus. Still another devoted fan wrote: "He [Betty] seems in motion, look and accent, another *Ganymede*" (Merritt 18-4, 130). Ganymede, of course, was the paramour of Zeus.

Invoking the Greek myths of the Pleiades and the Hyades, in which mere mortals are transformed into stars – an apt metaphor of celebrity-making – the anonymous author of the *Memoirs and Interesting Anecdotes of the Young Roscius* described Betty as a "heaven-born constellation" (1804, 10). The Marquesses of Wellesley and Mrs. Inchbald, while shying from the pagan, agreed that there was something transcendent about Betty. In their respective opinions, Betty was "an angel from heaven, for nothing on earth was like him"; "his beauty and grace were like that of a seraph" (Elledge 2000, 92, who cites an obituary in the *Times*, 1876; Inchbald 1808, 5). Mrs. Mathews (*née* Anne Jackson) related that one gentleman told her that he genuinely believed that Betty

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<sup>35</sup> *Times*, December 5, 1804, as cited in Carlson 1996, 593-94.

<sup>36</sup> *Ipswich Journal*, December 8, 1812.

<sup>37</sup> rpt. in *The Georgian Era*, IV (1834), 457.

<sup>38</sup> The anecdote is repeated in Gwynn 1898: 253-54. Repeatedly, William Hazlitt described Betty as a Sylvan shepherd, "murmuring Æolian sounds with plaintive tenderness" (Hazlitt 1930 VIII, 294)

was “gifted by divine inspiration; and added that he expected to see the roof of the theatre open some night, and his [Betty’s] spirit ascend through it” (Mathews 1857, II, 258n).

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## 8. Celebrity Culture is Pop Culture (or it *was*)

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Bettymania, we can agree, had been overdone. It was, after all, a *mania*. It ended when the boy actor ceased to be a boy. Had people mistaken the boy’s potential with his manifested talent; had they invested in Betty expecting a future pay-off, a cultural dividend of some sort, or had they been somehow caught off guard by the unprecedented hype; i.e., dazzled by pizzazz? Leigh Hunt, who had attacked Betty at the height of the mania, offered the beginnings of what was to become a convenient, face-saving solution. Betty was a great actor, for 18 months or so, but his talent was, alas, tainted by early success:

Most men begin life with struggles, and have their vanity sufficiently knocked about the head and shoulders, to make their kinder fortunes the more welcome. Mr. Betty had his sugar first, and his physic afterwards. He began life with a double childhood, with a new and extraordinary felicity added to the natural enjoyments of his age; and he lived to see it speedily come to nothing, and to be taken for an ordinary person. (Hunt 1966, 404)

However, after Betty died, still others suggested that society had erred, not by embracing Bettymania, but by resisting it. The boy’s eventual marginalization was a cultural misstep: one writer called him “a phenomenon of the right kind,” in his own way equal to the “superhuman precocity of Mozart”; another journalist argued that, had Master Betty not, upon adulthood quitted the stage, “he would have been a much finer actor at fifty than he had been at fifteen” – apparently the writer did not know that Betty returned to the stage in 1812 and continued performing for another ten years.<sup>39</sup> These various strands were united by the theatre historian Cecil Ferard Armstrong:

many who saw him [Betty] play [in 1812 and beyond, i.e., in later years], affirmed again and again that the powers were there, but an irresistible lethargy prevented his exercising them on new material. After sifting all the evidence, it looks almost as though Master Betty was a real genius, whose powers were strangled at their birth by that most effective of all destroyers, premature success. (Armstrong 1912, 326)

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<sup>39</sup> See Playbills – Stars – Male – Betty, W. H., Houghton Library, Harvard.

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## 9. What Remains the Same

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Bettymania may not exactly match our fixation with modern celebrity, though we might easily accept that it anticipated our cultural interests in a number of ways. Consider, for example, Hester Thrale Piozzi's observation: "Young Roscius's [Betty's] *premature* powers attract universal attention" (Piozzi 1989-2002, 4, 59; emphasis added). Mrs. Piozzi's interest in Betty had more to do with what Betty might do than with what he had already done. Equally intrigued with youth, beauty, and untapped potential, millions of today's viewers vote for their favorite contestant on *American Idol* and other talent shows not because they recognize a full-blown ability, but because they see someone seemingly ordinary (in this limited sense, like themselves) who, given the right opportunity, might develop into a star. Secondly and relatedly, people who generated and supported Bettymania basked in a shared sense of glamour; they were not only following the story, they were part of it. In sum, Bettymania allowed people, who might otherwise have little or nothing in common, to unite in the belief that Betty was worthy of their collective attention. Likewise, we may disagree about religion, politics, greenhouse gases, but we can all chew upon the latest celebrity tidbit. Perhaps more importantly, we can do so without giving offense. We are hardly likely to come to fisticuffs discussing whether Beyoncé's latest pink crop top is a fashion trendsetter or a sartorial flameout. That might not seem like much but, in a world with so much division, any form of social cohesion or civility cannot be dismissed lightly.

We may also draw parallels not only with Bettymania's successes but also with its seemingly catastrophic failure. The disappointed David Lester Richardson, writing some 35 years after the rage of Bettymania, concluded that he had been conned by "Master Betty, the actor, who was only a surprising boy, and who became but an ordinary man" (Richardson 1840, I, 42n). The idealized child inevitably became the fallen adult. Youthful TV and movie stars such as the Little Rascals, stars featured in 220 shorts and one full length film, Shirley Temple, the top grossing star at the American box-office during the height of the Great Depression, or, more recently, the TV tykes of *The Brady Bunch*, *The Partridge Family*, and *Family Ties* have all had to adjust to a comparable loss of celebrity status. From June 7, 1998 – November 28, 2001, there was even a show devoted to the phenomenon of the former celebrity: VH1's "Where Are They Now?" The episodes often featured interviews with fans who amassed troves of merchandise featuring their teen idols but who now (apologetically and sometimes bitterly) reflect upon their naiveté.

Whether supporters of Betty or of more modern celebrities regret their acts of collective allegiance and personal devotion, their recriminations in no way invalidate their idealizations. Even later acrimonious rejections of Betty or, for that matter, of any former celebrity, add to and support the notion of a shared

social investment. The real issue is whether fans fully appreciate that traditional forms of celebrity and long-term loyalty cannot coexist. Robert Burton writing on Betty in 1805, understood that the celebrity phenomenon of Bettymania would be brief and must end badly:

The fact is, the mob of mankind must have something to idolize, and poor Young Betty like a child overlaid by the mother, will be caressed to death. Exalted by puffing to an unmerited elevation, and then depressed to an unmerited oblivion. Such is human nature. (Democritus and Burton 1805, 1)

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## 10. What Has Changed: Fame and Celebrity are Now Indistinct

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Bettymania allowed people, who might otherwise have little or nothing in common, to unite in the belief that Betty was worthy of their collective attention. We might add that, given the national and cultural multiplicity of his fan base, it is difficult to imagine under what conditions Betty could have fulfilled such a miscellany of social trust. The broad demographics of Bettymania could not mask for long its social fault lines; Betty's fans were bound to splinter. However, the sudden collapse of Betty's popularity was not a sign of celebrity culture's failure but of its appropriate function: One idol must be replaced with another and another and another and another. Stella Tillyard argues that the standard rise-and-fall-narrative of the modern celebrity is a recent development, dating to perhaps only the early 20th century (Tillyard 2005a, 20, 21, 27; Tillyard 2005b, 61). However, given the chatter surrounding of Chatterton and the brief but dramatic events of Bettymania, it seems safer to say that this element of modern celebrity culture was already in place by the Georgian era. Discussing the inception of celebrity culture, however, now seems trivial compared to its date of expiration, which, I argue, occurred the moment Donald Trump was elected President of the United States.

At first glance, twenty-first century celebrity culture seems to be in fine form: The pop singer Madonna, for example, has recently condemned celebrity culture mostly because she no longer dominates it. Jancee Dunn (2015) notes that the singer is now simultaneously warring with and wooing fair-weather fans:

the subject of her advancing years dominates seemingly every conversation about her. As someone who once tracked her closely, I have watched with queasy fascination her attempts to navigate the undeniable fact that she is growing older before our eyes in an era of obsessive self-documentation and rampant oversharing – one that she had a direct hand in creating.

Dunn goes on to question why Madonna has “the seemingly compulsive need to shock and titillate, drawing from a playbook that is now over three decades old.” Madonna's failure here (and Dunn's disappointment) is obvious: Madon-

na cannot be shocking and titillating because she has been peddling the same *shtick* for decades. How about something new? Madonna might counter by pointing that she has done something new – just check out her new album! But, even if the material is new, Dunn (and we) already recognize why Madonna’s star is no longer quite as incandescent. Any new material would still be from an old, known, and, thus, passé celebrity. Any continued interest in a 90s pop star has the allure of road kill – thus, Dunn’s “queasy fascination.”

We might here rebut that since celebrity is constructed, it is by its very design artificial and iterational. By that logic, one version of Madonna is no more or less substantial than another. Appearing on this or that magazine or tabloid or talk show or award ceremony, ornamented in a never-ending parade of recognizable ropes- cone bras, fishnet stockings, jeweled crucifixes, dancers enacting sexual positions, shirtless men, etc., etc., Madonna’s protean art has become, ironically, enduring and thus, in terms of celebrity, unendearing. The art of celebrity-making can and will go on, but the celebrity reign of Madonna, the Queen of Pop is over and has been for some time.

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## 11. Celebrity and the Newly Famous

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Madonna’s campaign does not merely catalogue a fading star’s sad attempts to remain in the public spotlight; more urgently, it suggests that celebrity culture is now in the fame game. This is reflective both in academic studies and public parlance. Leo Braudy notes that modern renown is accompanied by a general rise of individualism at the cost of a reverence for traditional social hierarchies but he still invokes the anachronistic language of “fame” or the nearly oxymoronic “modern fame” (Braudy 1986, vii). To Claire Brock, fame and celebrity are synonymous, as in the following:

With the increasing demands of an audience to be entertained by contemporary *celebrities*, *fame-seekers* in the late eighteenth and early centuries had to become skilled in a more instantaneous, spontaneous form of glory. (Brock 2006, 10; emphasis added)

Later in her study, she defines fame not as something that is enduring, but, like the once-standard definition of celebrity, as something that is “fickle” and “certain to fade” (Brock 2006, 14). Tyler Cowen writes tautologically of “short-term celebrity” and “long term fame” (Cowen 2000, 79); Graeme Turner offers a similar muddle of terms (Turner 2004, 4).

Leaving the ivory towers of academia, we might query how these terms are commonly used. Are the Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, David Bowie, Madonna, or Prince celebrities or are they famous? The simple and straightforward answer is that they are both. Pop stars whose works run up and down the charts are well aware of the fickle nature of public interest. Their changing fortunes define their celebrity. But in the respective cases of the aforesaid artists (and their

media handlers), a continued ability to control the spotlight for a significant period defies the traditionally protean nature of celebrity. Having flouted the mantra “here today, gone tomorrow,” these stars have affected their eras politically, socially, aesthetically. Let us recall here Hester Lynch Piozzi’s definition of fame as something of “importance to future ages, and regions far remote.” Having supplied the soundtracks to our lives, these celebrities are now part of history – and their respective cultural impacts may serve as a quiet rejoinder to the notion that only Steve-Job-like innovators, war heroes, and professional politicians merit importance.

That seems like a healthy democratization of fame, but the downside is that the media commonly seeks celebrity opinions on politics, trade, the environment, etc., as if a celebrity’s views were as valid as any held by an acknowledged (but uncelebrated) expert in a given field. The click-baiting cyber-rag, The Blaze.com, for example, covered Madonna’s reaction to the recent election of fellow-celebrity Donald Trump thus:

Legendary pop star Madonna claimed at a women’s rally in Washington D.C., on Saturday that she has thought an ‘awful’ lot about blowing up the White House now that President Donald Trump lives there. [...] Madonna cursed repeatedly on live television, telling ‘detractors’ of the women’s march: ‘f\*\*k you.’ According to Heavy.com, Madonna also lamented over Hillary Clinton losing the election, saying that she believes Trump’s win should ‘wake us the f\*\*k up.’ (Enloe 2017)

Note that Madonna is here *not* described as a celebrity – i.e., ephemeral; rather, she is “legendary,” – i.e., timeless, permanent, immortal, marbled like the rock, in a word, famous.

Of course, Madonna’s celebrity status allows her to say things that few of us take seriously. Despite publicly calling for an act of terror, blowing up the White House and, presumably, its occupants, Madonna has not been questioned by the police, the Secret Service, or Homeland Security. Like President Trump’s midnight tweets, her status as celebrity trivializes what she has to say. In a very real sense, this is one media illusion attempting to tell us that we are being duped by another media illusion. We might here conclude that Madonna simply does not see the irony, or that as someone who has transformed her own celebrity into something more akin to fame, she understands the strategic importance of limiting Trump to *mere* celebrity. After all, the most expedient way to delegitimize a celebrity president is to treat him as a *celebrity* – i.e., as a performer attempting to fill our brains with trivial tweets and alt-fact soundbytes.

The question is, where will all this take us? It is one thing to recognize that politicians, like pop stars, now embrace the concept of self-promotion and, simultaneously, wage a war against the pop machine that attempts to render them yesterday’s news. What remains to be seen is whether, after four years of daily media attention (or eight years depending on a possible re-election), the

President of the United States will become famous, or remain merely another celebrity apprentice.

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